



Guilt by teej.318

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Summary: Will's cousin, Chris, and his parents are involved in a horrible car accident while driving into Hawkins for a visit with the Byers family. Takes place post season two.

1. Accident

Will looked up from his drawing as the phone rang. Jonathan was out at lunch with Nancy and his mom was busy making lunch in the kitchen. Will stood up, grateful for the chance to stretch his legs a bit and hurried over to the phone. He pulled it off the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Hey kid, it's Hopper," came the police chief's gruff voice. "Is your mom around? I need to talk to her about something important."

"Yeah, she's in the kitchen. I'll go grab her. Just a minute."

Will set the phone down on the counter and walked into the kitchen, where Joyce was preparing sandwiches for lunch.

"Hey, Mom," said Will. Joyce looked up at him. "Hopper's on the phone and he wants to talk to you. He says it's important."

"Thanks, honey," Joyce replied. "The sandwiches are ready. Can you put them on the table for me while I talk to Hopper?"

"Sure, Mom," said Will, rolling up his sleeves and walking over to the kitchen counter as Joyce walked out of the kitchen toward the living room. Will picked up the plates and set them down on the table and took his usual seat, waiting for Joyce. Just a few moments later, he heard a gasp from the other room.

"Are you sure?" Joyce demanded, her voice sounding shrill.

Will stood up and hurried into the living room. His mom had a distressed look on her face as she spoke to Hopper.

"OK, OK," said Joyce hurriedly. "We'll meet you there right away. Thanks for calling, Hop."

With that, Joyce hung up the phone and turned to Will.

"Sweetie, you'll have to have your lunch on the go," she said.

"Why, what's going on?"

"It's about Uncle Dale, Aunt Pearl and Chris," said Joyce, not quite meeting Will's eyes.

"What about them?"

"They were in a bad car accident on their way here for a visit. It's pretty bad."

Will ran into his bedroom, throwing his shoes on as fast as he could. He glanced around, finally finding his walkie-talkie and turned it on.

"Mike, come in. Mike!" he said into the walkie.

"I'm here, Will," came Mike's voice on the other end. "What's up?"

"I hate to do this, but I gotta cancel our dinner plans," Will said hurriedly, grabbing his jacket. "My aunt, uncle and cousin were in a bad car accident and we've got to get to the hospital."

"Oh shit," said Mike. "Is there anything I can do?"

"Yeah, when Jonathan drops off Nancy, tell him to meet us at the hospital. We're leaving now. Mom won't say how bad it is, but I have a bad feeling about this."

"I copy. You know what? I'll just have Jonathan take El and me with him."

"You don't have to do that, Mike..." Will started to protest, but Mike cut him off.

"It's fine, Will. You've had enough to deal with this year. We're coming."

"All right. I'll see you soon. Over and out."

With that, Will switched off his walkie-talkie before listening for Mike's reply.

Joyce led Will into the hospital waiting room, where Hopper stood waiting, dressed in his uniform like he almost always was.

"How bad is it?" Joyce demanded as they reached him.

Hopper sighed and then pulled her to the side. Will followed them and to his surprise, Hopper did not wave him off.

"Dale and Pearl are dead, Joyce," Hopper said quietly.

Joyce gasped and clamped her hands over her face. Will's eyes widened in shock.

"What happened to them?" asked Will.

"They had just entered the city limits when a pickup truck ran a stop sign and slammed into them," Hopper explained. "The truck was going about 65 when it hit them. Their car basically split in two. The coroner on scene thinks Dale and Pearl died instantly and didn't feel any pain."

Will nodded as he tried to digest all of his information.

"And what about Chris?" Joyce asked, sounding close to tears.

"They're working on him now," said Hopper, gesturing behind him toward the ER. "They say his chances are high. He was wearing his seat belt and he wasn't hurt by any of the car fragments. But they think he might have a concussion from hitting his head on the window of the car when the accident happened."

"Does Dad know?" asked Will, hesitating as he glanced at his mom, who seemed to pay no mind that he was talking about Lonnie.

"I called him, but didn't get an answer. I know he and Dale weren't really that close, so that's why I called you, Joyce."

Joyce nodded as she wiped away fresh tears from her cheeks. "Thank you, Hop. I really appreciate it."

"No problem," said Hopper. "Listen, I can't stay here much longer. My guys are bringing in the driver of the pickup for questioning and I'd

like to personally find out what the hell he was doing running a stop sign like that. You guys gonna be OK?"

"We'll be fine."

"I'll come back later," Hopper said, giving Joyce a quick one-armed hug before he walked away.

Joyce turned to Will and pulled him into a hug as they both dissolved into sobs.

Half an hour later, Will sat by himself as Joyce explained to Jonathan, Nancy, Mike and El what had happened. Once she was done talking, they all sat down. Nancy and Jonathan sat next to each other, holding hands as Jonathan cried quietly and Nancy put her arms around him. Mike and El sat down on either side of Will.

"Hey, how you doing? You all right?" Mike asked.

Will sighed. "I don't know," he replied. "I don't think it's really sunken in yet. I just can't believe I'm never gonna see uncle Dale or aunt Pearl ever again. But I'm more worried about Chris. What's gonna happen to him?"

"It sounds like he'll be fine," said Mike, trying to be optimistic. "At least physically."

"And emotionally?" asked Will.

Mike stared back at him, unsure of what to say. El spoke up for him.

"Friends take care of friends," she said simply. "Chris is a friend."

Will nodded and smiled sadly at her as a doctor came into the room and approached Joyce. They all stood up.

"How is he?" Joyce demanded.

"He's stabilized now, Ms. Byers," said the doctor. "Fortunately, we found no other external or internal injuries on him. He did suffer a concussion when his head hit the windshield, but he should make a

full recovery. We've taken him out of ICU and we're hoping he'll wake up soon."

"Will he have memory loss or anything like that?" asked Jonathan, choking back some tears.

"He might," the doctor said, nodding. "We don't think his long-term memory will be impacted, but his immediate short-term memory, particularly leading up to the accident, could be impaired. For how long, we can't say for sure, but we're hopeful that his memory won't be affected in the long run."

"Can we see him?" asked Will.

"Sure. But since he's still unconscious, let's make it family only for now."

"Thank you, Doctor," Joyce said. The doctor nodded and walked away from them. Joyce turned to the others. "We're going to go see him, you guys. You're welcome to stay, of course, but I want us to be there when he wakes up."

"Of course," Nancy said, giving Jonathan a quick kiss on the cheek before sitting back down.

Mike pulled Will into a hug that El joined.

"Let us know how he is, OK?" said Mike. "We'll stay here as long we need to."

"Thank you," Will whispered back to them.

They broke apart and Will turned to follow Joyce and Jonathan into the hallway leading to Chris' room. He followed them through several hallways before they finally stopped outside room 303 and saw Chris' name written on the whiteboard hanging outside of the room. Joyce opened the door and led the boys into the room.

Chris was still asleep and hooked up to an IV. Will noticed right away that Chris had a breathing tube in his nose and he was reminded instantly of his own stay in this same hospital a year ago after the events in the Upside Down. Joyce and Jonathan stood on the right

side of Chris' bed while Will walked around the other side and stood next to the bed. Joyce bent down and gave Chris a kiss on his forehead.

Just then, two nurses came into the room, carrying chairs for them to sit in.

"Thank you," said Joyce as they set the chairs down around Chris' bed.

"Of course, ma'am," said one of the nurses kindly. "You all stay in here as long as you need to. He should wake up soon."

With that, the two nurses left the Byers in peace. Will sat down in his chair and grabbed onto one of Chris' hands. He held onto it tightly.

"We're here, Chris," he said quietly, just loud enough for Joyce and Jonathan to hear him. "We're all here and we love you."

2. Grief

"Chris, can you hear me? Chris?"

Will's tone sounded more and more nervous as he tried to get a response from Chris. He looked up at Joyce and Jonathan, his desperation starting to get to him.

"How long before he wakes up?" Will demanded.

"I don't know, sweetie," Joyce replied in a heavy voice. "The doctor just said he hopes it happens soon."

"We just have to wait," added Jonathan.

Will nodded and turned back to Chris. He bent down and whispered into Chris' ear.

"Chris, it's Will. I'm here with Mom and Jonathan. We're all here and we really want you to wake up. Please, Chris."

When he was done whispering, Will backed away from Chris, not taking his eyes off his cousin. Suddenly, Chris started to stir in his sleep.

"Chris?" Will breathed, his eyes widening.

Slowly, Chris opened his eyes. He blinked a few times, glancing at Will.

"Will?" Chris said in a hoarse voice.

"Yeah, Chris. Yeah, it's me," Will said, nearly on the verge of tears. "It's Will. Mom and Jonathan are here, too," he added, gesturing to Joyce and Jonathan.

Chris slowly turned his head to face to Joyce and Jonathan.

"Hey, buddy," Jonathan said weakly.

"How are you feeling?" asked Joyce.

"Sore," Chris replied quietly. "My head really hurts. What's going on?"

"You're in the hospital, honey," said Joyce.

Chris frowned. "The hospital? What happened?"

Joyce hesitated. "We'll tell you in a minute. We need to let the nurses know that you're awake so they can have a look at you."

"So, who have we got?" Hopper asked, standing outside of the interrogation room with Powell.

"Guy's name is Jack McGerry," Powell said, handing Hopper a folder. Hopper opened it and examined its contents as Powell spoke. "He's got one prior for DUI and spent a day in jail. Nothing else that we could find on his criminal record. He doesn't even have a parking ticket."

"Well, he's about to get a lot worse," Hopper snarled, handing the folder back to Powell. "How much had he drunk at the time of the accident?"

"He didn't say how much, but his blood alcohol level was above the legal limit."

Hopper nodded and made to open the door to the interrogation room.

"Chief, you want me in there with you?"

Hopper shook his head. "I'll handle this scum on my own."

With that, Hopper opened the door to the interrogation room and walked in, shutting the door behind him. Jack McGerry, who had been resting with his head down on the table, immediately shot up.

"Mr. McGerry," Hopper said with an air of sarcasm. "Do you know why you're here?"

"Hell if I know," said McGerry as Hopper sat down in front of him.

"So, you don't remember the car accident you were in two hours

ago?"

"Car accident? I haven't been in no car accident."

"I see your drinking seems to have impaired your short-term memory, Mr. McGerry," Hopper said, glaring at McGerry with the utmost look of contempt. "Would it surprise you to know, Mr. McGerry, that the accident you caused led to the deaths of two of the three people in that car you ran into?"

"What?" asked McGerry, his mind still clearly affected by his drinking.

"And that the third person in that car suffered a concussion and is in the hospital right now, still unconscious?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Hopper stood up and slammed his hand down on the table. McGerry grimaced at the sound.

"You listen to me, you drunk son of a bitch. You killed two people because of your drinking. You had best pray that the boy who was in that accident makes a full recovery, or so help me I will make the rest of your life a living hell."

With that, Hopper stormed out of the interrogation room.

"Chief, are you all right?" Powell asked as Hopper stomped past him. Hopper ignored him and walked toward the office of the station.

"Are you sure you want to tell him on your own?" Joyce asked as the nurses cleared Chris' hospital room.

Will nodded. "I think it'll be easier for him to hear it from one person," he said. "I'll be fine, Mom."

"All right," said Joyce. "You take your time in there. And remember, it'll be hard for the news to sink in for Chris. He probably doesn't even remember the accident. Just be patient with him and remind him that we're all here."

"I will."

"We'll see you soon," said Joyce, giving Will a kiss on the head before turning and leaving with Jonathan. Will walked into Chris' room and sat down next to his bed.

"How are you feeling?" Will asked.

"My head still hurts a lot," Chris replied. "But that's it, really. So, what happened? The nurses said we were in a car accident."

"Yeah, you were. Hopper, the police chief, said you guys had just entered town when you guys were hit."

"What about Mom and Dad? Are they here in the hospital, too?"

Will sighed, not quite able to meet Chris' eyes. He grabbed onto one of Chris' hands.

"Chris..." said Will, trying to find the right words to say.

"Will, what is it?" Chris said, starting to sound nervous. "Are they OK? What's happened?"

Will sighed deeply before he replied. "They died, Chris. The car accident killed them."

"What?" said Chris, his eyes widening in shock. "What do you mean?"

"They were killed when the truck hit your car. Hopper said they probably died instantly and didn't feel any pain."

Chris started to breathe faster. "Oh my god," he said breathlessly. "Oh my god."

"I know," Will replied quietly.

"What am I...?" Chris said before he started to break down in tears. "What am I gonna do?"

With that, Chris broke down completely. Will stood up and over Chris' bed, pulling Chris into a hug as the tears flowed freely down

Chris' face.

Hopper sat down next to Joyce in the waiting room.

"How is he?" Hopper asked.

"He's awake," Joyce replied. "The nurses came in and had a look at him and they say he should make a full recovery from his injuries."

"Does he know what happened to his parents?"

Joyce nodded. "Will's in with him now telling him. He thought it'd be easier that way without us all in there."

"How are you doing?"

"I just can't believe it," said Joyce, shaking her head. "I mean, one minute they're driving into town and the next, Dale and Pearl are killed in a car crash and Chris ends up in the hospital with a concussion. It's just a lot to take in all at once."

Hopper nodded. "It'll take time to heal from this. For all of you, not just Chris. But I promise you this: that man will not be able to hurt anyone else if I have anything to say about it."

When Chris stopped crying, Will broke the hug and sat back down next to the bed. He held onto Chris' hand as Chris lay back down.

"Are you OK?" Will asked.

"I don't know," Chris replied in a heavy voice, not looking at Will but staring at the wall. "I just don't know what to do... about anything."

"You don't have to worry, Chris. We're gonna be here with you through everything. I can promise you that."

Chris sighed deeply and turned to face Will.

"I'm really glad you're here. I don't know what I would do if you, Jonathan and Aunt Joyce weren't here."

"We're always gonna be with you, Chris," said Will. "We're family and family takes care of family."

Chris nodded, wiping a fresh tear from his face. "I know," he said. "And I'm so grateful."

"You feel this?" Will asked, holding onto Chris' hand a little tighter. Chris nodded. "I'm never letting go, Chris. I promise. I'll never let go."

"Never let go," Chris repeated.

"That's right," Will said, smiling slightly. "Never let go."

"Listen, Will: I'm feeling kinda tired. I think I need some sleep, but I want you to stay here, if you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind," Will said. "I'll go and let everyone know that you've been awake and alert, but I'll be back as quickly as I can. I'll be here when you wake up. I promise."

"Thank you," Chris whispered, squeezing Will's hand. "I love you, cousin."

"I love you, too, Chris. You get some rest now."

3. Nightmare

Chris turned his head and saw Joyce had walked into the hospital room. He smiled at her, happy to see a familiar face that didn't belong to another nameless nurse.

"Hi," he said, his voice having finally returned to its full usage.

"How are you feeling?"

"The headaches are finally gone. But I feel kinda stressed out."

"What about, honey?" Joyce asked with concern in her tone.

"Everything," Chris replied breathlessly. "We have to get a funeral ready, I have to figure out what I'm gonna do with my life without my parents. I don't even know what I'm gonna do about the house or my stuff or..."

"Hey, hey, hey," Joyce interrupted, putting a hand on Chris' forehead. Chris stopped talking and took a deep breath, having spoken so quickly. "You don't have to worry about anything, Chris. I'm going to take care of you."

"You are?" asked Chris, looking relieved.

"Of course! You're family, Chris. What did you think, I was just gonna let you figure it out all on your own? You're still just a kid, honey. You don't have to worry about anything. I'm going to take you in and take care of you. And no protesting!" she added, seeing that Chris was about to interrupt her. "We can afford to take you in, Chris, I promise. With Jonathan working too, we make enough money to make ends meet. You will live as comfortably as you would with your parents, Chris, that I can promise you."

Chris breathed a sigh of relief.

"Thank you," he said, wiping a tear away from his face. "I mean, I know we're family, but you and I aren't even technically related anymore since you and Uncle Lonnie divorced..."

"I'll let you in on a little secret, Chris: Neither DNA nor marriage make a family. Love does. And we love you, Chris. You are our family, no matter what."

Chris nodded. "So, have they said when I'm getting out of here? This hospital food is getting old."

Joyce chuckled. "Well I've got good news for you, Chris, you can come home with us today. The doctor says you're clear to go. All the tests have shown you won't have any permanent injuries from the accident. So we can leave as soon as you're ready."

"Where's the sign out form?" Chris asked, causing Joyce to burst out laughing. He chuckled at his own joke. "Let's move it or lose it!"

Chris sat down on the spare mattress that Joyce had laid out on Will's bedroom floor. The small bag of clothes he had packed for the trip landed on the ground next to the mattress.

"It's not much, but it will get you through the first night or two," Joyce had said. "We'll go and get you a bed as soon as possible."

Chris smiled to himself, feeling eternally grateful for the kindness his family was showing him and for not treating him any differently. Will looked over at him from his bed.

"What's up?" Will asked.

"Oh nothing, I'm just thinking how lucky I am," Chris replied. "If the accident hadn't happened on the way here, I'd probably be staying in an orphanage right now." He shivered at the thought.

"Yeah, I wouldn't want that for you," said Will. "Listen, are you sure you don't wanna sleep on my bed? You are the guest and you were in a car accident just a few days ago."

"Will," Chris said, standing up from the spare mattress and sitting on Will's bed, looking deep into his cousin's eyes. For the first time in a while, he noticed that Will's eyes were the same color as his own. "I appreciate you looking out for me, I really do. But I don't want you to have to make any more sacrifices for me, OK? You've already done

enough by letting me even stay in here."

Will nodded at him.

"I just want to make you're sure you're all right," he whispered.

"I am," Chris said, giving Will a smile. "I am. I promise. I'm really glad that I have you, Jonathan and Aunt Joyce looking out for me. I just want everything to go on as normal as they can, y'know?"

"Yeah, I know," Will replied. "After I got lost in the Upside Down, everyone would treat me like I was gonna break. Except for Mike. He understood."

"He did?"

Will nodded again. "Yeah, he knew that I could handle it and that I didn't need anything extra. I guess you're in the same boat now, huh?"

"Pretty much. How is everyone, by the way? Anybody new in the Party?"

"We've got Max, who just moved here," Will explained. "She's pretty cool. She about beat up her brother when we were fighting the Mind Flayer. And then there's Eleven."

"Is she the girl with the powers you told me about? I thought she was gone."

"She was, but she was able to escape. Hopper's been taking care of her. He's adopting her, but she kinda has to stay under the radar for a while."

"Well, I guess now that I'm living here, we'll have to have a Party meeting so I can meet the others and see what everyone has been up to," said Chris. "Nothing like having one of the founding members return home for a meeting."

"Yeah," said Will, chuckling as he stifled a yawn. "Guess we should get to bed since I'm feeling pretty tired."

"Yeah we should. Night, Will."

"Good night, Chris."

Will woke with a start. He wasn't sure what had woken him, but he could sense it had something to do with Chris. He leaned to the side of his bed and looked over it. The spare mattress had blankets and a pillow on it, but no person.

"Chris?" Will mumbled sleepily as he threw his blankets off him. He stood up and stretched to adjust his body from laying down. He rubbed his eyes to try and wake up a little bit, yawning in the process.

Will tiptoed out of his room, trying his best not to wake his Mom or Jonathan. The bathroom door was open slightly and the light was off; nobody was in there. Frowning, Will kept walking toward the kitchen. The lights were off in the kitchen and the fridge was still closed. Will walked over to counter and pulled out a glass to have a drink of water.

Once the glass of water was full, Will turned and nearly dropped the glass in surprise when he looked out the front room window. Chris was sitting on the porch swing outside. Will took a few seconds to catch his breath before he turned around and filled a second glass to bring to Chris. He then carefully walked through the kitchen and living room before he reached the front door. Will had to hold the glasses in one hand in order to open the door.

As soon as he was outside, Will walked over to Chris, who was rocking the porch swing slightly.

"Do you mind if I sit?" Will asked in a quiet voice.

Chris didn't speak, but simply shook his head no. Will put one of the glasses of water onto the deck next to where Chris was sitting.

"That's for you," Will said.

Still, Chris did not say anything. He simply nodded in thanks as Will sat down next to him. Will drank about half of his water before he sat

it down on the floor next to him. He then turned to Chris.

"You OK, Chris?" he asked, speaking louder now.

Chris looked at Will. It was clear to Will that he had been crying, but was trying to hide it; his eyes were blotchy red and Will could see some tears in them.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Will demanded, scooting over and putting his arms around Chris in concern. He was relieved that Chris did not pull away.

"I saw them, Will," Chris said in a shaky voice. Will could hear that he was close to dissolving completely into tears.

"Who?" Will asked, confused.

"Mom and Dad. They came to me in a dream. They said it's all my fault." At this, Chris' voice started to break as fresh tears threatened to fall down his face. "It's all my fault, Will!"

"No, no!" Will said as Chris erupted his emotions. He was sobbing almost uncontrollably as Will pulled him into a hug, resting his head on Chris'. "None of this is your fault, Chris. I promise you that."

"If I hadn't wanted to come see you guys, they'd still be alive!" Chris moaned. "This is all my fault!"

"No, you listen to me, Chris," Will retorted, pulling himself off Chris. "Look at me." Chris obeyed his command. "That accident is nobody's fault but the man who crashed his car into you, do you hear me? None of this is your fault, you hear me? None of it."

It took Chris several moments to calm down. Will simply held his cousin close, trying to be a source of comfort amongst the great pain. After several seconds, Chris slowed his breathing and wiped away most of the tears.

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said, his voice still shaky. "I know it was just a dream, but it seemed so real, Will. It seemed so real."

"I know," Will whispered. "The bad ones always are, but then we

wake up and realize that we left all that ugliness behind."

Chris nodded and pulled Will closer, if that were possible.

"Thank you so much for coming out here," he said quietly. "I didn't want to wake you up, so that's why I left your room and came outside."

"I understand, Chris. I know how hard this is for you. I want you to know you can talk to me about anything you're feeling, OK?"

"I will," Chris replied. "I love you, Will."

"I love you, too, Chris."

4. The Snowball

Will opened the front door, carrying a stack full of papers with him. He walked over to the porch swing, where Chris was sitting and flipping through a magazine. Will sat down next to Chris, who looked up.

"What's up?" Chris asked.

"I found these in my desk just now and I had a laugh," Will replied, handing Chris one of the pieces of paper.

Chris chuckled when he saw what was on the paper. It was one of the fan comics they had created about three years earlier for Star Wars. They had created a whole set of stories about what they thought happened in between The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi. Some of their predictions had come true, such as Luke, Leia, Chewie and Lando rescuing Han, while others were totally off, including their prediction that Darth Vader was lying about being Luke's father.

"I can't believe you kept all of these," Chris said as he looked up at Will, smiling. "But I'm really glad you did."

"You know, I was thinking, what if we did some more of these now that you're staying with us?" said Will, sounding hopeful. "It could be just like old times; you can write the stories and I can draw them. We could do stories about what happens after Return of the Jedi."

"I'd love that."

"You would?"

"Of course! I had a lot of fun making these with you and I'd love to make some more. Plus, it'll help keep my mind off of things."

"Speaking of that, I had another question for you," said Will, setting down the stack of papers and putting a small rock on them so they wouldn't fly away. "Uh, Mom and I were talking last night. The Snowball at school is tonight. We're all gonna be there and we didn't

think you wanted to be on your own, so we thought we should invite you to come."

Chris was taken aback.

"Can I come?" he asked, looking confused. "I figured the dance would be just for Hawkins students."

"It is, but we're allowed to bring guests who don't go to school here. You'll be going to school in the springtime anyway after your grades are transferred, so really you're basically already a Hawkins Middle School student. What do you say?"

Chris chuckled. "I'd be honored," he said. "But I don't really have anything to wear."

"Mom's got that covered," said Will. "She found an old suit of Jonathan's in the closet and she says it ought to fit you."

"All right then," said Chris, giggling. "I guess I'll be going to the Snowball. You sure I won't be screwing up a hot date?"

"Oh I'm going stag," Will said, suddenly looking sad. "I don't really expect anyone to dance with me."

"Hey, there's nothing wrong with that. Personally, I'd rather dance with The Party anyway. Dancing with a group of friends is more fun."

Will grinned. "Yeah, you're right. Hey listen, we're gonna have a Party meeting after lunch if you wanna come and see everyone before tonight."

"Oh yeah, I'll be there. I'd love to catch up when we're not trying to hear each other over the loudspeakers."

The boys giggled.

The Party had gathered just outside the school grounds. Everyone was there, including Max and Eleven, both of whom Chris hadn't met yet. They sat in a circle and had some snacks which they were munching on as they talked.

"Why'd we meet so close to school?" asked Max.

"We had to," Mike replied, sounding slightly annoyed. "Hopper doesn't want El to be seen by too many people during the daytime."

Max shook her head and turned to Chris.

"So, new kid, what's your story? And how did you get into the Party so quickly when I had to work for it?"

"Well, I'm actually not a new member of the Party," Chris replied coolly. "I'm a founding member. Back when I lived here, Will invited me in. He's my cousin."

"Where have you been?" asked Eleven, sounding genuinely curious.

"My Dad got a job in a small town about an hour away, so we had to move a couple of years ago. I've always wanted to come back for Christmas and this was the first year we were able to do it."

Chris abruptly cut off. Will patted him on the shoulder while Lucas and Dustin looked confused.

"What's up, Chris?" asked Dustin.

Mike punched him on the arm.

"I told you about his parents!" Mike hissed under his breath.

"Oh, right," said Dustin. "Sorry, Chris."

"It's OK," Chris said shaking his head. "It's hard to talk about. I'm still wrapping my head around it."

"How are you doing, though?" Lucas asked. "Are you in any pain? I mean, physical?"

"Not since I left the hospital," Chris replied. "I had some headaches when I was on bed rest, but after I left, I'm OK now. I just wish the nightmares would quit coming around."

"Nightmares?" asked El.

"Yeah, I keep seeing my parents in my dreams. They keep blaming me for what happened. I know they're only dreams, but it always seems so real."

"Do you want me to talk to them?"

"How?" Chris asked, looking at her with confusion. El looked at Mike for him to explain.

"El can sort of teleport her mind to other dimensions," Mike said. "She can see and sense people who aren't physically in the same place she is. She can tell you what your parents are thinking, even if they're gone."

Chris looked from Mike to El, who nodded at him.

"Can you find them for me?" he asked. El nodded again. "I just need to know that they don't blame me for what happened."

"I will when I can," El replied softly.

"Thank you," said Chris, putting a hand on hers. El smiled at him.

"Friends help each other," she said.

"So, what is everyone wearing to the Snowball?" Max asked, desperate for a change in topic. Chris was silently relieved.

Chris came out of his and Will's room, putting on the jacket of the old suit that had belonged to Jonathan. Will and Joyce were practicing some dance moves while Jonathan filmed them.

"There you go, you're getting the hang of it," Joyce said as Chris grinned at them.

"Are you sure these are the dance moves everyone's doing?" Will asked, sounding concerned.

"Oh yeah, this is where it's at."

Will turned to Jonathan.

"Is it?" he asked.

"Yeah, I think so," said Jonathan.

Looking desperate, Will turned to Chris.

"Please tell me this is how people dance," he said.

"As far as I know," Chris replied, smiling. "I've never been to a dance that wasn't a wedding, so I couldn't say for sure, but that looks pretty normal to me."

Will nodded, looking relieved.

"I just don't want to mess up."

"You won't mess up, honey," said Joyce.

"Yeah, you'll be great," added Jonathan. "Just don't think too much and you'll be OK."

At that, Will and Joyce stopped dancing. Will hurried away to avoid having to continue. Joyce turned to Chris.

"You look handsome, honey," she said, giving him her warmest smile. "Do you want to practice dancing?"

Chris giggled. "No, I don't think so, Aunt Joyce. I'll be there dancing with myself mostly and with the rest of the group. I don't think I need to worry about doing a waltz, though I wouldn't say no to a dance with you."

"You're sweet, but I'll be outside waiting on you all to get done," said Joyce. "Hopper and I are just going to hang out while you guys have fun. Will wants some space after what happened last month and I know you could use a night with just your friends, too."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," said Chris, nodding. "It'll be good to keep my mind off of things."

"I'm really glad you're going, Sweetheart. I know you're gonna have a great time."

"Holy shit what happened to you?" Mike's voice demanded from Chris' left. He and Will turned and looked at Dustin, whose air had been done up in a way Chris had never seen it on a person.

"What?" asked Dustin.

The others simply stared at him for several seconds. Lucas took advantage of Max's distraction to ask her to dance.

"Are you trying to ask if I want to dance, stalker?" she asked playfully.

"Would you?" said Lucas.

"I'd love to," Max replied, smiling.

The two hurried off to the dance floor. Meanwhile, Chris had a closer look at Dustin's hairstyle.

"It's pretty fancy," he commented. "What inspired it?"

"Steve," Dustin said. "Are you sure it's not too much?"

"I like it. Honestly, I do. It's just so wildly different than what I'm used to seeing on you, but I could get used to it."

Dustin smiled, his new teeth shining brightly.

"I'm going in, guys. Wish me luck."

"May the Force be with you," Chris said as Dustin walked off to ask a girl to dance. Meanwhile, another girl approached Will.

"Hey, Zombie-Boy, do you wanna dance?" she asked.

Chris glared at the girl for calling him that name as Will looked to him and Mike. In unison, the two boys nodded fervently at Will, who walked off with the girl. Mike turned to Chris once Will was gone.

"You gonna try and dance with anyone?" he asked.

"Nah, I'll live," Chris answered. "I don't really know anyone here but

you guys. Besides, I'm not a big fan of slow dancing."

"You sure you don't wanna dance with El or something?"

"What and leave you hanging, Mike?" asked Chris, chuckling.

"No, I just don't want you to be left out."

"Oh Mike," said Chris, putting a hand on one of Mike's. "I've almost forgotten how much of a good friend you are. Not many people would let their girlfriends dance with a friend. I appreciate the offer, but I'm OK. Really," he added with emphasis as Mike opened his mouth to interrupt. "This is your special night with her and I want you to enjoy it. I'm OK. I'm totally happy watching you guys dance."

Finally, Mike relented and nodded.

"Sorry," he said. "I know you're OK with just being here with us, but I just feel bad that we're all dancing and you're here."

"It's fine, trust me," Chris said as he looked over Mike's shoulder. "And speak of the devil and she shall appear," he added, nodding in the direction of the entrance.

Mike whipped around and saw Eleven had just walked into the gym. She was looking around the room for him. He stood up, trying his best to straighten his jacket.

"You look great," Chris hissed at Mike. "Go and greet her."

Mike nodded absently before he walked toward Eleven, who looked at him and smiled. Chris shook his head in slight disbelief, smiling as he watched the two approach each other. They exchanged some words before Mike turned and looked at Chris. El looked at him too. Chris looked back at them, confused, just as Will sat back down.

"Well that was interesting," Will said, snapping Chris out of his trance.

Chris gasped slightly. "Shit, I didn't even realize you had come back over here," he said chuckling. "Did you have fun dancing?"

"Yeah, it was fun," Will replied. "It was weird, but I had fun and I think she did too."

"That's good," said Chris as Mike and El walked toward their table, holding hands. "Wonder why they're coming over here and not dancing."

Will turned and saw Mike and El approaching.

"Maybe they're too nervous," he said.

"Heh, they can join the club. You looked pretty nervous yourself."

"Hey!" Will protested as Chris giggled. At that, Mike and El had reached the table. El sat down next to Chris.

"You look stunning," Chris said.

El smiled at him.

"Thank you," she said quietly. Then, she lowered her voice so only Chris, Will and Mike could hear. "I saw them, Chris."

Chris' eyes widened. "You did?" he asked. "Did you hear what they thought about the accident?"

El nodded. "They don't blame you. They know you just wanted to see your family. They love you with all of their hearts."

Chris was close to tears as he nodded and smiled at El.

"Are you sure?" he asked, hardly daring to believe it.

"Friends don't lie, Chris," El replied.

"Thank you," Chris said, reaching out and lightly grasping one of El's hands. "You didn't have to do that, but I'm so glad you did."

El smiled. "Friends help friends," she repeated.

"Thank you again, El," said Chris as a slow song came on and El stood up and looked at Mike.

"Do you want to dance?" Mike asked.

"I don't know how," El answered in a quiet voice. Chris had to suppress a giggle.

"Neither do I. How about we figure it out together?" Mike suggested. El smiled and nodded at him. They walked off to dance together, but stayed in Chris and Will's sight.

The girl who had danced with Will approached him again.

"Will, can we dance again?" she asked.

Will looked to Chris, who nodded at him.

"Go," Chris said. "I wanna stay behind and watch all of you dance."

"Are you sure?" Will asked.

"Will, never keep a lady waiting," Chris warned, nodding at the girl.

"Yeah," said Will absently as he stood up and walked away with the girl. Chris chuckled to himself.

The song entered its first chorus and Chris watched as all of his friends were dancing to it. Nancy had started to dance with Dustin. Chris smiled, knowing that Nancy, at least, saw Dustin's good heart just as he did. Jonathan stood nearby, smiling and filming them and others dancing around him. Max and Lucas had their eyes locked on one another when Max initiated a kiss that seemed to take Lucas by surprise. Will and the girl were smiling politely at one another and looked just comfortable enough to be dancing with each other. Mike and El, meanwhile, were totally enamored by one another. There was passion in their eyes and Chris knew that they were meant for each other. Mike and El kissed briefly before they held each other close and kept dancing. Chris smiled as he watched the rest of The Party dance around him, his heart full of joy for the first time since the accident.

5. The Funeral

Chris looked over to the bathroom door when he heard a knock. Will was standing in the doorway, fully dressed for the funeral.

"Can I come in?" Will asked.

"Yeah, I'm just making sure my hair doesn't look insane," Chris replied.

Will chuckled as he walked into the bathroom, leaving the door open.

"You like fine, Chris," he said, reaching the sink and turning it on to wash his face.

"I know, I just want everything to be perfect for the funeral."

"How are you feeling?" Will asked as they both heard a knock at the front door.

"Honestly, I just want to get through this as quickly as possible," said Chris. "I know it sounds selfish, but I don't want to put it off any longer and I want it to be done sooner rather than later so I can move on, you know?"

"Yeah, I get it. It can't be easy having to do all of this so close to Christmas."

"I'm just glad I have you all with me," Chris said.

Just then, they heard arguing voices coming from the living room.

"I have a right to be here, Joyce!" yelled a gruff voice.

Chris and Will looked at each other in shock; they both knew that voice anywhere. It was Lonnie. Chris nodded at Will's questioning look and the two of them hurried out of the bathroom. Once they had reached the living room, Joyce and Lonnie stopped their bickering.

"Hey, kiddo," Lonnie said, giving Chris one of his odd-looking smiles.

"What are you doing here, Uncle Lonnie?" Chris demanded.

"What do you mean, what am I doing here? I'm here for your parents' funeral. I want to be here for you."

"Well, where the hell have you been for the last week and a half?" Jonathan challenged, having walked into the room to see what the commotion was about.

"Don't you dare talk to me like that, Jonathan," Lonnie snarled. "I have every right to be here."

"Yes, that's true, but Jonathan has a point, where were you when the accident happened?" Joyce asked. "Where were you when Chris was in the hospital? Where were you when we brought him home? Where were you, Lonnie?"

"Oh, don't get started with me, Joyce."

"Enough." Chris said in a calm, but loud tone.

Everyone stopped talking and looked at Chris, whose expression was difficult for them to read. When he spoke again, he didn't sound angry, but he was firm in his tone.

"You're right, Aunt Joyce, he should have come to see me or at least call to make sure I was OK," he said quietly. "And yes, Uncle Lonnie, you're right that you do have a right to attend the funeral since Dad was your brother. So, you can come, but I don't want you anywhere near me or the rest of the family."

"What are you talking about, of course I'm going to sit with the family!" said Lonnie incredulously.

"Dad, for once in your life, can you just listen?" asked Will.

Hearing Will speak seemed to convince Lonnie to shut his mouth finally. He nodded wordlessly at Will before Chris continued.

"You're more than welcome to attend the funeral, Uncle Lonnie, but I don't want you anywhere near me or the rest of the family. You can pay your respects to Mom and Dad on your own, but other than that,

I want you as far away from them as possible at the funeral, and I don't want to see you during the ceremony. Got it?"

Lonnie looked from one person to the other before he set his eyes on Chris, who had a blank expression on his face and looked totally serious. Finally, he nodded.

"All right. I'll keep my distance."

"Thank you," Chris said politely. "Now, can you please go there by yourself so we can finish getting ready?"

Lonnie didn't say anything but turned and walked out the front door, slamming it behind him. Joyce walked over to Chris and hugged him.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. "I had no idea he would try to show up for this."

"It's OK. He just needs closure. He doesn't really deserve it, but I'm not going to take that away from him. I know Mom and Dad wouldn't have wanted that."

"I'm very proud of you for being the bigger person, Chris," said Joyce.

"Yeah, you're a better man than me," added Jonathan. "Personally, I wouldn't have let him anywhere near this funeral, but I get why you did let him."

Chris looked over at Will, who was looking at him with a curious expression on his face.

"Am I crazy?" Chris asked.

"Is that a trick question?" Will responded, causing everyone to laugh. Chris had the loudest laugh of them all and almost found it difficult to breathe as he kept laughing. "But to answer your question, no, I don't think you're crazy. I agree with Jonathan and Mom. You're being the bigger person and it shows how mature you are, Chris."

Chris grinned at Will.

"Thanks, Will," he said. "And thank you, Jonathan and Aunt Joyce,

not just for your kind words today, but for everything you've done for me and everything you're planning on doing by taking me in. I love you all."

"We love you, too, Chris," Joyce said pulling him into a hug that Jonathan and Will quickly joined.

The rest of the Party was waiting for Chris and his family when they arrived at the church where the funeral was going to take place. Chris greeted each one of them individually, thanking them and giving each of them a tight hug to show his gratitude. Once they were done greeting each other, most of the Party went to go hang up their coats with Joyce and Jonathan while Mike and Eleven remained behind with Chris and Will.

"How are you doing, Chris?" Mike asked.

"Well, Uncle Lonnie decided to show his sorry face around here," Chris replied, gesturing behind him. Mike looked over his shoulder and could see Lonnie standing in the back of the room by himself.

"What's he doing here?" Mike demanded. "Did he stop by your house?"

"He tried to say he had a right to be here, despite not calling to see how Chris was doing when he was in the hospital," Will answered in a disgusted tone.

"But I decided to let him stay as long as he isn't anywhere near us during the funeral," Chris finished. "I don't know why, but I knew it was the right thing to do."

Mike nodded.

"Well you're definitely a better person than me," said Mike. "I don't think I would've been as nice. But other than that, are you OK?"

"As OK as can be expected on this occasion," said Chris. "Thank you both for coming and for being here for me."

"You don't have to thank us," said Mike.

"Friends help friends," El added, smiling kindly at Chris.

"Yeah, they do. And I want to thank you again for seeing them for me."

"Of course, Chris. I just wanted to help you."

"You certainly did," said Chris. "Now, uh, can you guys give me a minute? I'm gonna go in by myself and say my goodbyes to them before the service starts."

"Go ahead," said Mike. "We'll be here when you're done."

"Take as long as you need," added Will.

Chris nodded and gave Will a quick hug before he turned to the double doors leading into the nave. He took a deep breath before he opened the doors. Slowly, Chris walked down the aisle to where the two caskets stood at the front of the room. Both of the caskets were open for viewing. He looked down at his parents for the first time since their deaths and found himself nearly overwhelmed with emotions. Chris took several breaths to calm himself down before he spoke to his parents.

"I'm so sorry that you both are gone," he whispered. "I hate that you aren't here anymore, and I feel terrible that we wouldn't have been in the car that day if I hadn't wanted to see Aunt Joyce and the boys for Christmas. But, I am thankful that you both don't blame me. I'm grateful that Eleven was able to talk to you both and I know in my heart of hearts that you both love me, and for that, I'll always be thankful."

"I love you both so much, Mom and Dad. And I want you guys to know that I'll be all right. Aunt Joyce is taking me in and will take care of me. Even though we're not family by law, she doesn't care and she just wants to take care of me. And Jonathan and Will have both been amazing, too. Will in particular has taken care of me better than anybody in my life other than the both of you. I'm lucky that I have family who will take care of me and love me the same you both did. I love you, Mom and Dad."

With that, Chris wiped the tears away from his face. He turned and walked through the nave and back into the outer room, where Will, Mike and Eleven were still standing. Will wordlessly pulled Chris into a hug that Mike and El quickly joined, trying their best to comfort Chris.

To the side, Chris noticed someone was talking to Joyce. He broke apart from the others and turned to Will.

"Who's that talking to Aunt Joyce?" he asked.

Will looked over at his mother and recognized the man immediately.

"Oh, that's Hopper. He's the police chief. He's the one who called us and told us you were in the accident."

"I should go greet him," Chris said.

"I'll go with you," said Will.

Chris nodded absently at Will and the two walked over to Joyce and Hopper, who stopped talking when they realized Chris and Will had joined them.

"Hi there," Chris said, extending his hand. "You must be Hopper."

"Jim Hopper," Hopper replied in his somewhat gruff voice, though it sounded kinder than normal to Will. "I'm very sorry for your losses."

"Thank you for your sympathy and for coming today," said Chris. "And I want to thank you for contacting my family. Thanks to you doing that, I'm able to have a good life with them and not on my own."

"I just tried to do the right thing, kid. I'm glad to see you're doing well with Joyce."

At last, the service had finished at the cemetery. Chris had been holding one of Will's hands as his parents' caskets were lowered into the ground and the priest said his blessings. He had also held onto El's hand with his other hand, and El held hands with Mike, and Mike

used his free hand to hold onto Lucas's hand and so on. The Party was holding onto one another as one cohesive unit, united in their love for one another. When the priest announced the end of the service, Chris lifted his head from Will's shoulder and stood up with everyone else. He hugged all of the members of the Party and thanked them for coming while Will, Jonathan and Joyce waited patiently.

Once Chris was done talking to the Party, he and Will grabbed each other on the waist and started walking back to Joyce's car, along with Joyce and Jonathan, who latched themselves onto either side of the boys. When they reached Joyce's car, they found Lonnie waiting for them, leaning on the car.

"What the hell do you want, Lonnie?" Joyce demanded. "Can't you let us go home?"

"I will," Lonnie snapped. "I just wanted to say thank you for letting me be here, Chris. And I want you to know if there's ever anything you need..."

"You don't have to worry about me, Uncle Lonnie," Chris interrupted. "I'm already in good hands and I don't need anything from you."

"Yeah, but," Lonnie started to protest, but Chris shook his head.

"Really, I don't need or want you to do anything for me. Just keep living your life and I'll live mine with what I have now, OK? Thank you, anyway, but I'll be all right."

Lonnie sighed, resigned to the fact that Chris was effectively rejecting his involvement in his nephew's life.

"See you around, kid," Lonnie muttered as he stalked away from Joyce's car and walked over to his own.

"You OK?" Joyce asked, giving Chris a kiss on the cheek.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Chris replied. "I know he thinks he's trying to help, but I don't need his pity. I've got everything I need with you guys."

With that, Chris pulled the others into another group hug, trying his

best to express his gratitude through his emotions.

6. Epilogue: Gift Exchange

Chris and Will sat in their shared bedroom, both lost in their thoughts as they worked on one of their *Star Wars* comics. It was early in the evening on Christmas night. They had spent the day with Jonathan and Joyce opening presents, playing games and eating lots of great food Joyce and Chris had made on Christmas Eve.

As was tradition while making these comics, Chris was working on the manuscript while Will drew the pictures that went with each scene. In this scene, Han Solo and Princess Leia were getting married while Luke Skywalker was hurrying across the galaxy from a mission in order to make it back in time for the wedding.

Chris had just finished the first draft of the manuscript when he suddenly remembered something important.

"Whoops!" he said quietly, standing up quickly and hurrying over to the closet.

Will looked up from his drawing.

"What's up?" he asked.

"Uh...it's a surprise," Chris said as he walked into the closet and reached for the small gift he had hidden there a few days earlier. He walked away from the closet and over to Will's desk, where Will was sitting and working on the drawing. Chris set the present down next to Will.

"What's this?"

"It's a Christmas gift. I wanted you to open it when it was just you and me together. It's a kinda personal gift."

Will smiled at Chris before he reached down and opened one of the drawers and withdrew a small package, handing it to Chris.

"I got something for you too that I wanted to open when it's just us," Will said.

Chris chuckled. "I guess we think alike. But you didn't have to get me anything else."

"Oh, come on, Chris, did you really think all I was gonna get you was a notebook?"

"No, I guess not," said Chris, laughing heartily. "Go ahead and open yours."

"All right," said Will, ripping the paper open. A small box was inside. He opened the box and pulled out a necklace that was inscribed WB — his initials. Will looked up at Chris with tears in his eyes. Chris was smiling at him.

"Open it," he said.

Will followed the command and opened the charm. Inside was a photo of him and Chris from three summers ago of them working on the original *Star Wars* fan comics they had made. Will chuckled as he looked up at Chris again, tears shining through his eyes.

"I love it," he whispered. "Thank you."

Chris bent down and gave Will a hug.

"It's a good luck charm for you to wear. And now I can finally wear the one that I had gotten, too," he said, pulling out a nearly identical necklace to Will's, though with CB as the initials. He put the necklace on. "Now we'll both have luck."

Will smiled at Chris and put his own necklace on. Once he did, he gestured at Chris.

"Open yours!" he said excitedly.

"OK," said Chris, ripping the wrapping paper off his gift as carefully as he could. Once the gift was free, he held up two small picture frames that had hand-drawn pictures in them. The picture on the left was of Chris with his parents in a recreation of one of their recent family photos. The picture on the right was of Chris, Will, Jonathan and Joyce together on the couch with "Family" written across the top of the picture.

Chris looked up at Will, with tears of his own shining in his eyes. He smiled at Will, who smiled warmly back at him.

"I love them," Chris whispered. "Thank you so much."

"Of course," said Will, standing up from his desk and pulling Chris into a hug. "I hate that Aunt Pearl and Uncle Dale aren't here with us to celebrate Christmas, but I'm so glad you're here, Chris."

"I am, too, Will," said Chris. "I'm so lucky to have you, Jonathan and Aunt Joyce. I love you, Will. Merry Christmas."

"I love you, too, Chris. Merry Christmas."